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### Comments

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## *RUSSIAN ICONS AND AMERICAN MONEY, 1928-1938*

A detailed census has yet to be made of the many Russian icons acquired by American citizens in the first two decades of Soviet rule.<sup>1</sup> The bulk of such an inventory would comprise icons picked up in the street markets and provincial cities of Soviet Russia, bought at state run stores, or from émigré antique dealers in the European capitals. Varying widely in age, quality, and condition, they were part of the detritus left by the Bolshevik revolution, dislodged from their natural habitat in churches, monasteries, institutions and private homes, and transposed to a land where their original liturgical or devotional function had little relevance.

Not all of the icons that came to the United States between the wars were acquired in this haphazard fashion, however. Beginning in 1929 the Soviet trade organ charged with exporting art and antiques from the Old Regime (Antikvariat) actively channeled onto the American market icons that might attract a stereotypical American consumer by pandering to his fantasies and exploiting his naiveté. Seen in this light, the formation of America's most distinctive icon collections between the wars was not a simple case of one nation plundering another in times of revolutionary upheaval. As a cartoon in an émigré newspaper suggests, a more complex exchange based on national and class stereotypes was at work, as the young Soviet state made room for its own new culture by offloading its unwanted detritus on a nation sensitive to its own cultural lack (Fig. 1).

Stimulating a desire for commodities was the central challenge facing the capitalist system during the Depression years and "consumer engineering," with its emphasis on understanding the needs and desires of the target audience, was the key strategy for achieving it.<sup>2</sup> In its efforts to tap the American

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1. The closest to such a census is John R. Barns, *Icon Collections in the United States* (Torrance, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1991). Only collections in public museums are listed, however.

2. "The newest business tool to receive a definite name has come to be named consumer engineering. Briefly it is shaping a product to fit more exactly consumers' needs or tastes, but in its widest sense it includes any plan which stimulates the consumption of goods." Earnest Elmo Calkins, "What Consumer Engineering Really Is," in Roy Sheldon and Egmont Arens, *Con-*

market for Russian art, the Antikvariat leadership had its own notions of consumer engineering. It was a truism of Soviet ideology that Americans had a fondness for sensationalism – a fascination with royalty, celebrity, and status – bordering on the pathological.<sup>3</sup> With the Depression came a new kind of American collector, unsure of his taste and susceptible to persuasive marketing. It was not coincidental, then, that American matrons were offered icons suffused with tragic memories of the murdered imperial family or that American businessman George Hann acquired a collection with a showy museum pedigree. For this first generation of American icon collectors the provenance of the pieces they bought constituted a large part of their value and attraction, a fact that the Soviet trade organs exploited to good effect. It is these questions of marketing tactics and consumer expectations that I want to explore in this article.

## I

Of the cultural commodities displaced by the revolution, icons were the most abundant and the most diverse in appraised value. Since its introduction to Russia from Byzantium in the tenth century, icon painting had undergone a complex stylistic evolution before degenerating into a largely assembly-line production in the last years of the empire. This descending scale of value was already clearly articulated in March 1922, when the Soviet of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) decreed that no icons could be taken out of Soviet Russia that

... have traces of age, are repainted as part of a renewal (*vozobnovlenie*), or have signs of darkening prior to the exposure of their original painting. No icons are to be released from before the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century; no icons made between 1550 and 1700 of high artistic quality or with a composition of historic or ethnographic [*bytovoi*] significance; from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, icons with a particularly strong tendency towards realism and scenes of daily life; from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, icons from before 1850

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sumer Engineering. *A New Technique for Prosperity* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 1932), p. 1.

3. "First-quality goods go primarily to England and France. Second-quality goods exclusively to Germany. Silver in the pseudo-Russian style and new porcelain to Scandinavia. Items of a sensational nature are mostly suited for sale in America." Memo of 1920 from Narkomvneshtorg to Lenin, cited in O. Iu. Vasil'eva and P. N. Knyshevskii, *Krasnye konquistadory* (Moscow: Soratnik, 1994), p. 118.

that are dated and signed by the artist. . . . Icons prior to 1800 may be allowed with duty. Icons after 1800 are duty-free.<sup>4</sup>

As a rule of thumb, age was thus the determining factor in evaluating an icon's value, but icons were not mere works of art, nor were they always what they seemed. As devotional images in which the divine was made manifest, even the humblest icon was imbued with sacred aura. Regardless of its perceived aesthetic value, every icon was an active presence that received the cumulative prayers of the faithful across generations. Since every canonical icon was required to be a faithful copy of its prototype, a casual observer could easily mistake a nineteenth-century image for one painted several centuries earlier. Moreover, the practices of icon veneration fostered the ongoing physical renewal and adornment of the image, whether by repainting it or dressing it in a decorative cover (*oklad*). Icons were thus literal palimpsests, simultaneously preserving layers of history on a single wooden surface. For all these reasons the appraisal of Russian icons was a task requiring uncommon expertise.<sup>5</sup>

In the first decade of Soviet power the history of the Russian icon as a work of medieval art was still in its early stages and the scholarly community's concern was focused on discovering and preserving the earliest layers of that history. In an atheist state only the best and oldest icons could expect to survive and it was the charge of Glavmuzei, the museum subsection of the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment (Narkompros) to establish evaluation criteria. The fate of the oldest, "first-tier" icons from monasteries and churches was clear. As Irina Kyzlasova describes in her essay, a spirit of collaboration between the Orthodox hierarchy and Glavmuzei representatives ensured that Russia's most venerated icons were removed to the security of the Commission for the Preservation and Restoration of Works of Early Painting (from 1924 the State Central Restoration Workshops) in Moscow for treatment and study.<sup>6</sup>

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4. Cited in Vladislav Tolmatskii, "Ot 'nel'zia' do 'mozhno'. Vyvoz chastnykh kollektsii iz Sovetskoi Rossii: nekotorye fakty," *Antikvarnoe obozrenie*, 2 (2002), 28.

5. These challenges are described by one of the emissaries dispatched by Glavmuzei to inventory icons in 1922: "In the churches you see a huge quantity of icons that at first glance are terrible artisanal (*kustar*) work of the nineteenth century that of course needn't be restored. But it would be a huge mistake not to take a closer look and study these wretched products of the craftsman's hands. Only an inexperienced worker will rush past these icons, completely covered with all-over covers, also of pathetic workmanship." (N. Morgunov, "Itogi i zadachi (Iz deiatel'nosti Glavmuzeia)," *Kazanskii muzeinyi vestnik*, 1 [1922], 39-40).

6. The State Russian Museum was the central destination for icons in the Northern regions. See V. K. Laurina, "Otdel drevnerusskoi zhivopisi," in Gosudarstvennyi Russkii Muzei. *Iz istorii muzeia. Sbornik statei i publikatsii* (St. Petersburg: Gos. Russkii Muzei, 1995) pp. 99-104.

Equally clear was the fate of those many thousands of "late icons" whose hallmark was a silver or gold cover (*oklad*), often adorned with enamel, filigree, pearls and precious stones. During the campaign to confiscate church valuables in the name of famine aid, which took place in 1922-23, these "third-tier" icons were shipped to the various depots of Gokhran, the State Depository of Valuables established in 1920, where the covers were removed and melted down.<sup>7</sup> Sir Martin Conway visited Gokhran in the immediate aftermath of the confiscations and observed "a great heap of icons covered with embossed silver-gilt plates and some beautifully adorned with enamels of the seventeenth century."<sup>8</sup>

Those icons that fell into a middle ground between these two extremes – of reverent care and wanton destruction – went into the Gosmuzeifond (State Museum Reserve), a central museum fund on which all the country's museums would draw, and of which their own collections were an integral part, allowing for the free transfer of works of art among the country's institutions. Throughout the 1920s the depositories of the Gosmuzeifond acted as transit camps for all the major private icon collections formed before the revolution. Here they were inventoried, classified, and either redeployed to one of the new Soviet museums, earmarked for sale, or simply kept in reserve. In the case of the famous collection of Stepan Riabushinskii, confiscated after its owner's emigration in 1918, some icons were moved to the State Historical Museum, while others were dispersed to Antikvariat, the Kremlin Armory, and museums in Perm and Kuban.<sup>9</sup> A notable exception to this pattern of dispersal was the collection of Il'ia Ostroukhov, which remained intact as the Museum of Painting and Icon-Painting in Moscow, with the former owner in residence as curator until his death in 1929. The ideological rationale for this was clear: Ostroukhov was "the first to collect icons not as works of religious archaeology, an object of fashion or religious cult, but as a work of art."<sup>10</sup> As such, his collection exemplified the new Soviet museum icon, purged of undesirable content and a benchmark for the highest aesthetic standards.

7. On the confiscations campaign, see Vasil'eva and Knyshevskii, *Krasnye konkostadory*, pp. 153-205; and *Iz "iatie tserkovnykh tsennostei v Moskve v 1922 rody: Sbornik dokumentov iz fondov Revvoensoveta Respubliki* (Moscow: Pravoslavnyi Sviato-Tikhonovskii humanitarnyi universitet, 2006).

8. Sir Martin Conway, *Art Treasures in Soviet Russia* (London: Edward Arnold, 1925), p. 32.

9. V. I. Antonova and N. E. Mneva, *Katalog drevnerusskoi zhivopisi XI-nachala XVIII vv. v dvukh tomakh* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1963), 1: 28. Similar fates met other major private icon collections, for example, the Bakhrushin, Bobrinskii, Brokar, Guchkov, Zhiro, Sollogub, Kharitonenko, Zhibanov, and Shirinskii-Shikhmatov collections.

10. G. I. Vzdorov, "Otkrytie drevnerusskoi zhivopisi. Dorevoliutsionnyi period," in *Khudozhestvennoe nasledie. Khranenie, issledovanie, restavratsiia*, 10 [40] (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1985), 26.

Russian scholars have commented on the obliteration of provenance information and the dispersal of private collections that resulted from the creation of the Gosmuzeifond.<sup>11</sup> If the Commission to Remove Signs of Ownership (*Kommissiia po obezlicheniiu*) at Gokhran literally reduced the confiscated property of the church and of private individuals to scrap, then as I. V. Kliushkina suggests, the activities of the Gosmuzeifond had a similar effect (intentional or not) in disconnecting much of Russia's cultural heritage from its provenance. The term "icons without passports," used to describe the icons transferred to the Tret'iakov Gallery from the Gosmuzeifond in 1929, captures this element of displacement and loss of cultural memory.<sup>12</sup>

In the midst of this mass redistribution of icons and redefinition of their role in Soviet society, the icons used by the imperial family retained a problematic aura of their own. For most of the 1920s they remained in situ in the palace-museums created after the 1917 revolution, including the Anichkov Palace, the Alexander Palace at Tsarkoe Selo, Gatchina, and Pavlovsk. Guides presented the private apartments of the Alexander Palace in particular as object lessons on the bourgeois bad taste of the last tsar and his family. In a corner of the tsarevich's bedroom a large icon cupboard held many icons given by well-wishers and presented on ceremonial occasions. But it was the empress's bedchamber that was especially popular among visitors eager to penetrate the inner sanctum of the imperial family's private life. "This was the bedroom of the Tsarina," a typical guided tour of the Alexander Palace went. "You see, it was quite a little room, and so crowded, and all in such bad taste. And all the ikons – she was very superstitious, she would pray for hours. . . ."<sup>13</sup> Nor was this contempt for the murdered family's taste confined

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11. On the ways in which provenance information was lost at the State Historical Museum in Moscow in the 1920s and early 1930s, see I. V. Kliushkina, "Istochniki po atributsii kollektsii, postupivshikh v GIM iz Gosudarstvennogo Muzeinogo Fonda v 1918-1920-e gody," in *Istoricheskomu muzeiu – 125 let. Materialy iubileinoi nauchnoi konferentsii* (Moscow: Trudy GIM, 1998), pp. 34-50, and I. L. Kyzlasova, "Vozrozhdenie otdela drevnerusskoi zhivopisi v 1930-e gody: Ekaterina Alekseevna Nekrasova. (K 100-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia uchenogo)," in *Zabelinskie nauchnye chteniia. God 2004-i. Istoricheskii muzei – entsiklopediia otechestvennoi istorii i kul'tury* (Moscow: Trudy GIM, 2005), p. 430.

12. *Gosudarstvennaia Tret'iakovskaia Galereia. Katalog sobraniia*, p. 15.

13. E. M. Delafield, *I Visit the Soviets: The Provincial Lady in Russia* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1937), p. 137. By one estimate, "... there were more than six hundred icons hanging on the wall above the two beds in the bedroom [of Nicholas and Alexandra]." (Yury Bobrov, "Late Icons as Symbols of Holy Russia: Icons in the Everyday Life of the Russian Royal Family," in *Icon Conservation in Europe: Frankfurt-Am-Main, 24-28 February 1999*, ed. by Nina Jolkkonen et al. [Uusi-Valamo: The Valamo Art Conservation Institute, 1999], p. 46.) According to the official website of the Alexander Palace, this impression was exaggerated by the museum's curators, who moved "other ikons belonging to the family here from the children's rooms that were shut down by the government and turned over to Secret Police officers as private trysting rooms where they met their mistresses. Other ikons came from palaces where Romanov rooms were destroyed – such as the Winter Palace. In 1941 there were

to the Soviets. After touring the private apartments at the Alexander Palace journalist Walter Duranty described in *The New York Times* how, "The crowd paused awestricken in the imperial bedchamber with its extraordinary collection of ikons, festooned with rows of gaily colored Easter eggs. The sacred images alternated with the worst horrors of chromo-lithography ever known to man. It was the apex of bourgeois [sic] vulgarity, without a single redeeming feature."<sup>14</sup>

The very newness and modernity of these images made them easy targets for derision, particularly when measured against the great medieval icons being removed from churches and monasteries and restored under scientific conditions. The reign of Nicholas II had seen a flowering of Orthodox piety, reflected in a campaign of church building and canonizations, and a corresponding boom in both the production and the collecting of icons<sup>15</sup> The elaborate *oklads* that adorned many of the imperial family's personal icons came from the leading jewelry firms operating before the revolution, including Khlebnikov, Ovchinnikov, Olovianishnikov, Kurliukov, and Fabergé. Stylistically they ran the gamut from Art Nouveau to neo-Rococo and the Old Russian Style, while the painted boards beneath were "a sort of stylistic crossroads where Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox images met."<sup>16</sup> To many were affixed presentation plaques – from regiments and merchant guilds, convents and noble assemblies – so that they were also a material record of social relations in late imperial Russia.

The Feodorovskii Cathedral at Tsarkoe Selo, completed in 1920, was the ultimate aesthetic expression of this late flowering of Orthodoxy. The iconostasis in the upper cathedral was filled with new icons painted in the seventeenth-century style favored at court, while the lower crypt church was a synthesis of rare old icons with new ones, for instance of the recently canonized Serafim of Sarov. The result was a multi-sensory space that actively foiled any attempt to discriminate between icons on the basis of their objective value as painting. Quite the reverse, the icons were subsumed within the fabric of worship created by gorgeous embroidered textiles and candles flickering on metal *oklads*. "A foreigner will remain unmoved before these icons,

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where Romanov rooms were destroyed – such as the Winter Palace. In 1941 there were more than 300 ikons on the walls." (<http://www.alexanderpalace.org/palace/bedroom.html>).

14. Walter Duranty, "Populace view treasures of Czars. Make Sunday Visit to the Imperial Apartments in Winter Palace. Like Late Czar's Taste. Leningrad Crowds Take Delight in Inartistic Decorations which pleased Nicholas II," *New York Times*, July 15, 1924, p. 19.

15. On this movement, see Oleg Tarasov, "The Russian Icon and the Culture of the Modern: The Renaissance of Popular Icon Painting in the Reign of Nicholas II," *Experiment*, 7 (2001), 73-102; also Evgeniia Kirichenko, "Tsarskoe Selo in the Early Twentieth Century: An Expression of Nicholas II's Ideal of Popular Monarchy," *ibid.*, pp. 31-72.

16. Bobrov, "Late Icons as Symbols of Holy Russia," p. 46.



whereas we are overcome by their mysterious power," wrote one enthusiast in 1915. "Because before these icons, or ones like them, the souls of our forebears poured out their most powerful feelings, because before them they experienced rare flashes of great joy and powerful waves of that great sorrow that faith and faith alone could help them bear."<sup>17</sup>

By the 1920s the icons most intimately associated with the imperial family had come to embody, for proletarians and intellectuals alike, the very essence of the Old Regime's corruption. The negative associations that imperial icons had accrued were captured in a scene from Sergei Eisenstein's 1927 film *October*, in which revolutionaries burst into the empress's bedchamber in the Winter Palace in search of members of the deposed Provisional Government. In a simulation of the actual bedroom in the Alexander Palace, icons and Easter eggs cover the walls around the bed. (Fig. 2) Close-ups of guardian angels and saints alternate with views of the empress's water-closet, bedpans, and bourgeois trinkets in a montage that embodies the derision and almost visceral disgust that these intimate spaces and their icons now aroused.

## II

Antikvariat's monopoly on art exports began on January 23, 1928 with the decree, "On Measures to Intensify the Export and Realization of Antiques and Works of Art."<sup>18</sup> To ensure Antikvariat a free hand, all competing retail activities were closed and exports rigorously restricted.<sup>19</sup> The Gosmuzeifond, which held museum reserves in trust for the entire nation, was disbanded and its contents appraised for export. Museum collections were placed at Antikvariat's disposal, palace collections liquidated, and many churches and monasteries closed or destroyed.

17. E. Poselianin, "Drevniaia krasota," *Svetil'nik*, 3-4 (1915), 12, 13, 14.

18. *Sud'by muzeinykh kollektzii. Materialy VI Tsarskosel'skoi nauchnoi konferentsii*, 6 (St. Petersburg: Tsarskoe selo, 2000), p. 130.

19. A document dated September 22, 1928, "List of Antiques and Art Works Not Permitted for Export Abroad" stated that, "Icons of the 17th century or earlier periods, and signed works by well-known artists from a later period cannot be exported. . . . paintings, miniatures, icons, engravings, works of art that are poorly preserved, restored, even if only overpainted, washed away [*smytye*], damaged, dirty, cut [down?] . . . can be released only after a careful expertise has been performed by the organs of Glavnauka in each separate case." (Russian State Archive of Economics, [henceforth RGAE], unnumbered document dated 22.9.1928; copy in Vladimir Teteriatnikov papers, New York Public Library.) A more stringent order from the People's Commissariat for Trade, co-signed by Mikoian and Lunacharskii, prohibited the export of icons produced before 1800.

Antikvariat's trade procurements from art exports for 1928-29 were set at 833,499 rubles, nearly 142,000 of which were to come from icons.<sup>20</sup> The question was what sort of icons to sell and how to market them, given the absence of an established price structure for icons on the international market. As Igor' Grabar', head of the State Central Restoration Workshops, warned Antikvariat's chief, A. M. Ginzburg, "... without a market value there can be absolutely no expeditious organization for realizing icons, which is why we must first and foremost work to create high prices."<sup>21</sup> Grabar' urged a long-term marketing strategy. To avoid the prospect of dumping icons at rock-bottom prices, he argued, a discerning clientele must first be cultivated by careful exposure to first-rate icons. Grabar' succeeded in convincing Ginzburg that the most effective way to expand the European market was through "scholarly preparation," i.e., mounting a traveling exhibition, accompanied by a catalogue and lectures that would show the true history of the icon's development. A major selling point was promoting Soviet successes in scientific restoration and initiating the public into the secrets of the icon's many-layered history. In less than a year the necessary icons had been gathered and a catalogue written. In February 1929 the exhibition embarked on a four-month tour of Germany, traveling on to Vienna, London and finally Boston.<sup>22</sup>

Even before the launch of the traveling exhibition there were hopeful signs of a potential American customer base for icons among those who had traveled to the Soviet Union. Visitor books from the Ostroukhov Museum of Painting and Icon-painting in Moscow list a regular smattering of American names in the years 1925-1929, including John Dewey (Summer 1928) and Alfred Barr and Jerr Smith (Christmas 1927-1928). Harvard alumnus Bayard L. Kilgour, Jr. made several visits to Russia in 1927-1929 and returned home to Cincinnati with a collection of icons bought outright in Moscow.<sup>23</sup> The entrepreneurial critic Dr. Christian Brinton, who specialized in promoting the "racial art" of the Russians and other national groups, traveled twice to the

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20. Photocopy of unnumbered document from RGAE in Vladimir Teteriatnikov papers, New York Public Library.

21. Memo from Grabar' to Administration of Gostorg, August 8, 1928 (Manuscript Division of the State Tret'iakov Gallery, henceforth ORGTG, f. 106, 527.)

22. On the exhibition and its eighteen-month tour of the United States, see Wendy Salmond, "How America Discovered Russian Icons: The Soviet Loan Exhibition of 1930-32," in *After Icons*, ed. by Douglas Greenfield and Jeffrey Gatrall (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, forthcoming).

23. Bayard Kilgour traveled to the Soviet Union after graduating from Harvard in 1927. He bought a collection of thirty-nine icons from a German, Dr. Devrient, who had been stationed in Russia during the war and revolution. The collection was subsequently bequeathed to the Cincinnati Art Museum, Ohio.

Soviet Union in 1925-1928 to negotiate an icon exhibition (ultimately unsuccessful) with the All-Russian Society of Cultural Ties (VOKS).<sup>24</sup>

But Antikvariat's leaders were too impatient to wait for an ideal market to mature.<sup>25</sup> Not only was the "land of the dollar" essential to Soviet trade plans, but securing diplomatic recognition by the United States was one of the Party's highest priorities and every sign of cultural goodwill between the two nations had to be exploited. Since 1924 the American Trading Organization (Amtorg) had represented the unrecognized Soviet government's interests in the United States.<sup>26</sup> In estimating the buying power of the United States for art, antiques, and icons, both Antikvariat and Amtorg had their sights set not on American intellectuals and museums (unlike Grabar'), but rather on the post-war businessman. In a memorandum sent to Moscow from New York in June 1928, Amtorg's representative wrote:

A large proportion of the representatives of American firms who come to the USSR for various reasons approach us with requests to give them the opportunity to acquire in the USSR carpets, antiques and so on. . . . There is no doubt that in the interests of developing our ties with North America it is essential to capitalize as broadly as possible on the interest Americans display in the Soviet Union's valuables [i.e., particularly in old icons and painting].<sup>27</sup>

In May 1929 Amtorg arranged for a large group of American delegates to the Congress of the International Chamber of Commerce in Amsterdam to be invited to the USSR.<sup>28</sup> For the Soviets this unofficial delegation was a major

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24. Brinton and Frederick Starr spent about a month in Moscow in the late spring and early summer of 1928. Brinton brought assurances of interest from the Fogg Art Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Brooklyn Museum of Art. VOKS director Ol'ga Kameneva agreed that VOKS would "collect, pack, and transport to America at its own cost and expense a representative and characteristic collection of Russian art." The following May, Edward Fox, director of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, rejected the proposal because of the conditions imposed by VOKS. On Brinton, see Robert Williams, *Russian Art and American Money, 1900-1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 83-110.

25. Ginzburg's initial plan of selling export-grade icons direct to the public as part of the exhibition was shelved to avoid negative international publicity.

26. Amtorg, created in New York City in 1924 to develop trade and industrial contacts with American firms and individuals. On the foundation of Amtorg, see "Glavnyi sovetskii kupets v Amerike," *Ogonek*, no. 42 (Oct. 1989), pp. 6-7.

27. "Kasatel'no organizatsii VSASSh vystavki kustarnykh izdelii, antikvarnykh tsennostei i proizvedennii sovremennikh sovetskikh khudozhnikov i skul'ptorov," copy of unnumbered document from RGAE in Vladimir Teteriatnikov papers, New York Public Library.

28. The invitation was issued by the Russo-American Chamber of Commerce, but in fact arranged by Boris Svirskii, the Soviet Commissariat of Foreign Affairs' diplomatic agent in the United States, and Amtorg.

breakthrough in establishing closer relations with the United States. Amtorg touted it as, "... the first more or less organized attempt by representatives of American business circles to become acquainted with the economic situation in the USSR and with prospects for Soviet-American trade."<sup>29</sup> The ninety-one members of the group represented "almost every possible variety of the bourgeois world, from gigantic international banks and industrial concerns to firms making mousetraps; from major political figures and businessmen to girls with million-dollar dowries (e.g., Miss Alice Delamar)."<sup>30</sup> Two weeks into their stay, on July 25, the *New York Times* reported that one member of the group, Mrs. Henry J. Pierce of New York, wife of the president of Washington Irrigation and Development Co. and "widely known as the only woman passenger on the unsuccessful zeppelin flight from Germany to America," had "bought \$30,000 worth of paintings and ikons from the Soviet Government. The pictures, which at one time hung in the Hermitage Gallery in Leningrad, were the property of Russian royalty. . . . The icons (religious pictures) date from the 15<sup>th</sup> century and were purchased for \$15,000." Other members of the delegation also bought Russian art objects, among them "Jouett R. Todd of Louisville Ky and Richard D. Scandrett of New York."<sup>31</sup>

No trace remains today of Catherine Pierce's purchases, making it impossible to verify the media claims of fifteenth-century icons and Hermitage paintings. But when Antikvariat was given the go-ahead three months later to liquidate the contents of the Alexander Palace at Tsarskoe Selo, it was clear that her spending spree had made a deep impression on those charged with selling the contents of Nicholas II's private residence.<sup>32</sup> Since the closure of the imperial family's apartments in the Winter Palace in 1926 and the historical rooms in the Anichkov Palace (the Dowager Empress's residence) in October 1927, the personal effects of the Romanov family had accumulated into substantial stockpiles, among which were quantities of icons. In 1928 more icons of historical interest were removed from the palaces at Pavlovsk and Gatchina at Antikvariat's request.<sup>33</sup>

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29. *Sovetsko-Amerikanskii otnosheniia. Godi nepriznaniia 1927-1933* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond Demokratiia, 2002), p. 169.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 177-80.

31. *New York Times*, July 25, 1929, 7:1.

32. On August 16, 1929 the head of Glavnauka, M. Liadov, informed Narkompros's representative in Leningrad, B. Pozern: "On 13 August the Council of Deputy Presidents of the Sovnarkom of the USSR and STO passed a resolution to immediately transfer the Alexander Palace at Detskoe Selo to the Lenin Academy of Agricultural Sciences. In putting this resolution into effect Glavnauka requests that you immediately resolve the question of utilizing the museum's contents and after an inspection quickly proceed to liquidate the palace." Cited in Gafitullin, n. 66.

33. The Anichkov Palace's historical rooms were liquidated in January 1928, two thirds of the displays were sent to Gosfond and Antikvariat, the rest divided among museums" (R. R.

In a secret memo of August 1929, Antikvariat's Tat'iana Lilovaia laid out her strategy for selling off the contents of the Alexander Palace in their entirety to a single American buyer. Lilovaia suggested using a figure well-known abroad, such as the former Director of the Hermitage, Sergei Troinit-skii, to secure the deal, then finding "people from the financial world interested in trading with the USSR, three to four people from the recent trade delegation, who bought paintings" to act as middlemen.<sup>34</sup> The ideal client Lilovaia had in mind was quite unlike the Morgans, Fricks, and Havemeyers of the pre-war era. He would come from a social stratum whose members lacked "even a minimal degree of artistic culture and as a result own things they understand nothing about and that therefore give them incomplete pleasure." He was "a person who desires to create in his home [in details] 'the setting of a Russian emperor's palace'." Only an American with new money and no cultural pedigree, she reasoned, could be gulled into buying the worthless kitsch that filled the imperial apartments. "We should and can make full use of the customer's pathological interest and the elements of a specific vanity (*tshcheslavie*)."<sup>35</sup>

When the Wall Street Crash came two months later, Lilovaia's visions of a single parvenu customer able to buy the Alexander Palace interiors outright evaporated. But the broad marketing strategy she had proposed went ahead, tailored now to fit the changed demographic of the American art market. The middlemen who represented Soviet interests in this exchange were the brothers Armand and Victor Hammer and their associate Alexander Schaffer.

### III

Robert Williams was the first to cast doubt on Armand and Victor Hammer's version of how they acquired the "imperial treasures" they sold on the American market in the 1930s.<sup>36</sup> As one of the American entrepreneurs who capitalized on the Soviet state's need for imports in the 1920s, Armand Hammer had traded in medical instruments, grain, asbestos, caviar, furs, and pencils before the government shut down his concessions in 1930. In Hammer's version of events, their Moscow home had become "a virtual museum, filled with relics of the bygone splendor of the Romanoff Dynasty" and he struck a deal with the state to take his collection back to the United States as

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Gaffullin, "Leningradskii Gosudarstvennyi muzeinyi fond. 1917-1929 gody," in *Sud'by muzeinykh kollektsii*, p. 323.)

34. Nikolas Il'in and Nataliia Semenova, *Prodannye sokrovishcha Rossii* (Moscow: Trilistnik, 2000), p. 294.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 293.

36. Williams, "Selling the Romanov Treasure," in *Russian Art and American Money*, pp. 191-228.

compensation for the loss of his pencil concession. According to his brother Victor, however, almost all the priceless items in the Brown House belonged to the Soviets and were placed there to impress Western visitors.

... [Armand] talked Mikoyan into allowing us to take our art holdings out of Russia and to pay for our concessions with art objects – the Soviets had no hard currency and were glad to do it. ... Armand also persuaded Mikoyan to allow us to sell Soviet objects on consignment until 1935 at the same time that we sold ours."<sup>37</sup>

Armand Hammer's biographers have been skeptical about the imperial provenance of what he traded, and scathing about its aesthetic value. "Little, if any of it, had been owned by the czars – or, for that matter, by Hammer. The bulk of it was tourist junk."<sup>38</sup> Robert Williams, too, dismissed it as "the debris of Russian hotels, monasteries, shops, and palaces."<sup>39</sup> There can be no doubt, however, that the personal icons of the imperial family formed a highly visible part of the stock offered to American customers.

The Hammers made their first foray into selling items from the liquidated imperial palaces in January 1931, just as the traveling exhibition of medieval icons was opening to great fanfare at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A three-day auction was held at the Wallace H. Day Galleries at 16 E. 60th St. in New York, selling art objects and decorative furnishings from the private apartments of the Romanov family. The icons offered were small devotional images embellished with silver covers; for example, "a metal and jeweled framed icon, seventeenth century, was purchased by a woman for \$75."<sup>40</sup> The contents were eventually auctioned off at a net profit of almost \$70,000,<sup>41</sup> but not before the Grand Duchesses Ksenia and Olga, Nicholas II's sisters, had issued a temporary injunction to prevent the sale of what had in effect been their personal belongings.<sup>42</sup> The failure of their suit signaled to the Hammers

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37. Armand Hammer with Neil Lyndon, *Hammer* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1987), p. 193.

38. Edward Jay Epstein, *Dossier: The Secret History of Armand Hammer* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1999), p. 138.

39. Williams, *Russian Art and American Money*, p. 221.

40. "Women Bid Keenly at Czars' Art Sale," *New York Times*, Febr. 28, 1931, 12:2.

41. Victor Hammer as cited in *The Dark Side of Power*, p. 105. See also Walter Rendell Story, "The Native Art of Russia. Three Exhibits Present Ideas to Decorators," *The New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 25, 1931, p. 15. Two months later the gallery offered an auction of furniture, art objects, and icons from "noble Russian families." "Emanuel Naidis of Paris" was "selling the collection as the representative of the various owners, having been their art advisor for years." (*New York Times*, Mar. 30, 1930, II 7:1.)

42. *The New York Times* reported that the grand duchesses "asserted that the collection had been appropriated by the Soviet and that the sale had not been authorized by the Czar's heirs,

and their Soviet partners that the coast was clear for more comprehensive sales.

The Hammers embarked on their venture at a moment when the American art market was undergoing a shift as a result of the Depression. "The former customers have had a set back," *The New York Sun* reported in 1933. "There is however, ready to take their place a large group of new collectors, men and women who have money and who are just getting interested in buying some form of art. It is to these buyers that the dealers must turn, and the most of them frankly know little about the things which have taken their fancy."<sup>43</sup> What the new collector shared with the previous generation hit hard by the Depression was a weakness for the sensational. As Anne Odom notes in her essay, Marjorie Merriweather Post was particularly susceptible to the glamour and pathos of Russian royals who sought refuge in the United States in the 1920s. Between 1928 and 1932 Anna Andersen, a.k.a. the Grand Duchess Anastasia, was warmly welcomed in New York. Memoirs like the Grand Duchess Marie's *Education of a Princess* (1930) fanned this sympathetic interest in the Romanov family and Armand Hammer was quick to cash in with his *The Quest of the Romanoff Treasure* in 1932. An Amtorg report to Moscow noted that, "'Princes' and such-like who come here are still being willingly embraced by American 'society.' . . . The Washington papers recently reported on a reception at the British embassy for 'her imperial highness Grand Duchess Kira (from Russia).' Present at the dinner were American secretaries, several senators, and congressmen."<sup>44</sup>

In March 1931 the Hammer brothers began marketing "Fine Russian Icons and Relics from Royal Russia" out of their L'Ermitage Galleries at 3 East 52<sup>nd</sup> Street. In early 1932, they launched the first of their celebrated department-store sales of Russian Imperial Art at Scruggs-Vandoort-Barney in St. Louis, repeating their initial success at department stores across the country.<sup>45</sup> The new enterprise involved a marketing strategy that Armand Hammer would later recall with cynical relish: "I promoted the hell out of the sale by giving it a healthy dose of snob appeal. I ordered the printing of fancy price tags embossed with the Imperial Romanoff two-headed eagle crest and pre-

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alleged owners of the objects. The heirs failed to post the required bond of \$25,000 and the show-cause order was denied." *New York Times* Feb. 27, 1931, 4:3. The Hammer's L'Ermitage Gallery (established 1928) was also sued in 1932 by Marie Romanov. (See Steve Weinberg, *Armand Hammer: The Untold Story* [New York: Little Brown, 1989], p. 82).

43. Reported on the back cover of *Art Digest*, Feb. 15, 1933.

44. *Sovetsko-amerikanskie otnosheniia*, p. 240.

45. From Saint Louis the stock went to Marshall Field (Chicago), Bullock's Wilshire (Los Angeles), Halle's (Cleveland), the Emporium (San Francisco), B. Forman Co. (Rochester), Kaufman's (Pittsburgh), Woodward and Lothrop (Washington, D.C.), and Lord and Taylor (New York).

pared an elaborate catalog that paid tribute to the 'skilled artisans devoted to the glory of the czar'."

Hammer's clientele was clearly defined as female ("Mrs. Consumer" was an important target audience for the proponents of consumer engineering);<sup>46</sup> women whose purpose was not serious collecting but rather interior decoration and "making period collections for their homes." They were offered an inventory that included Fabergé *objets de vertu*, porcelain and glass, ecclesiastical vestments, and the table linens of the imperial family. Many of the icons that passed through the Hammer brothers' hands, and those of their main American competitor, Alexander Shaffer, in the 1930s were accompanied by parchment testimonials asserting that they were from Tsarskoe Selo, the Winter Palace, Pavlovsk, and Gatchina.<sup>47</sup> Icons now in the Detroit Museum of Fine Arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery were acquired in this way.<sup>48</sup> Following the department store sales the Hammers established Hammer Galleries in New York, which was "fed by a continuing stream of art objects from Moscow . . . , a collection of Hammer family-and Soviet owned merchandise."<sup>49</sup> New icon reserves began to show up in Hammer's catalogues in 1934, when the Soviets closed down the Feodorovskii Cathedral at Tsarskoe Selo.

In their memoirs and later interviews, both Hammers took a cynical delight in playing up the gullibility of their largely female clients, as if they were the victims of a con game. For instance, they hired "Prince Mikhail Gounduroff, a big Russian guy with a huge nose who insisted that he was a legitimate Romanoff. . . . Before an auction Prince Mikhail worked the crowd and pointed out the priceless things that had been stolen from his family. That convinced the women that the objects really had once belonged to nobility

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46. Sheldon and Arens emphasized the importance of targeting women in their *Consumer Engineering* (see n. 2). For example: "Every good buyer is constantly on the lookout for those articles which will most perfectly suit Mrs. Consumer," p. 198.

47. According to Robert Williams, in 1932 the Hammers "arranged to obtain a visa for their friend Alexander . . . to join them in their New York venture." (*Russian Art and American Money*, p. 220.) In 1933 Shaffer opened his own gallery, the Schaffer Collection of Russian Imperial Treasures, in Rockefeller Center (renamed A La Vieille Russie in 1941 when Jacques Zolotnitzky and his nephew Leon Grinberg emigrated to the United States from Paris). Williams writes: "It was Schaffer whose travels to the Soviet Union continued to replenish both his own Rockefeller Center store and the Hammer Galleries." (*Russian Art and American Money*, p. 225).

48. Lillian Pratt bought her first icon at the Lord and Taylor show in January 1933 and Mrs. James Sibley Watson purchased an icon of the Ascent of Elijah in his Fiery Chariot for \$375 at B. Forman Co. in Rochester That same year she gave the icon to the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery. The icon's provenance was given as the Winter Palace.

49. Carl Blumay with Henry Edwards, *The Darker Side of Power: The Real Armand Hammer* (New York and London: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 106.



and encouraged them to pay ridiculous prices." One of the Hammers' early customers, India Early Minshall, met Gundorov on her first visit to their gallery. With his help she acquired "a carved wooden presentation bread-and-salt platter given to Czar Nicholas II and Czarina Alexandra in 1896, an icon reputed to have come from Alexandra, and a small medal of 1825."<sup>50</sup>

Among the many imperial icons that found their way into American homes was an icon of "Christ Not Made by Hands" (1773), presented by Catherine II to her son Paul on the occasion of his betrothal (Fig. 3). It was one of the star items featured in the Hammers' Lord and Taylor exhibition in 1934 and was bought by Mrs. F. W. Roebeling, Jr. of Trenton, New Jersey. Thanks to Rifat Gafifullin, we know that the icon was among the first items deaccessioned from Gatchina in early 1928, although the Hammers gave its provenance as Pavlovsk.<sup>51</sup> With its gold, enamel and diamond-studded *oklad* and rather unremarkable painting, one can understand how the Gatchina curators might have felt it could be sacrificed to obey the Antikvariat injunction: "Without destroying the core museum collections, use every possibility to select export goods worth a relatively high amount."<sup>52</sup>

Other icons were also traceable to their former imperial owners by the presentation plaques affixed to them. A small icon presented to the tsarevich in 1912 was bought from Hammer Galleries by Barbara Hutton as a birthday gift for her aunt, Marjorie Merriweather Post, in 1943. From the Schaffer Collection of Russian Imperial Treasures came an icon that had occupied a central spot in the icon cupboard in the tsarevich's bedroom, presented to him by the Nobility of Nizhnii Novgorod (Fig. 4).<sup>53</sup> Lillian Thomas Pratt divided her custom between Hammer and Schaffer, acquiring a large number of icons from the Anichkov, Alexander, and Winter Palaces, many still bearing dedicatory inscriptions to Nicholas II and members of his family.

Almost without exception these were icons that straddled the border between painting and decorative arts by virtue of their jeweled and precious outer surfaces. In the minds of most icon aficionados at this time, the metal covers that adorned many of these late icons were symptomatic of icon paint-

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50. Henry Hawley, "India Early Minshall. Portrait Sketch of a Russophile," in Géza von Hapsburg, *Fabergé in America* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996), pp. 93-94.

51. The icon was listed in the "Crown Jewel Collections in The Hammer Collection of Russian Imperial Art Treasures" sale at Lord & Taylor in 1934. It was reproduced in the *Catalogue of the Pictorial Art Loaned for the Exhibition "Five Hundred Years of Russian Art." Benefit Russian War Relief. The Gould House Galleries of Gimbel Brothers* (New York, 1943), no. 92. The icon was also included in the Hammer Galleries' *Exhibition "Seven Centuries of Russian Icon Painting August 2nd to 31st, 1937*, no. 152.

52. Gafifullin, p. 172 in this volume.

53. The icon subsequently belonged to Reverend A. T. Zugelter of Chicago until his death in 2003.

ing's decline; Iurii Olsuf'ev, for instance, saw their proliferation in the nineteenth century as a way of compensating for the "indifference to color" seen in late icons.<sup>54</sup> But the Hammers deftly turned this deficit into a plus, claiming that the proliferation of *oklad*-covered icons in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was "due to the fact that the Orthodox religion forbade the use of sculptured figures on the inside of the churches." It thus satisfied a thwarted desire for the three-dimensional in Orthodox worship. The firm of Fabergé & Co., the Hammers asserted, "developed this elaboration of the Icon to its highest degree."<sup>55</sup>

The Hammers pointedly marketed their stock not as works of Russian art, but as "a collection of memorabilia, freighted with human interest and drawn together by a thread of lasting significance." "To possess even one of these relies is to own a bit of the world's history, to have at hand tangible evidence of the rise and fall of a great Empire," was how Hammer Gallery's sales brochure for 1935 put it. "And too, there is romance in bringing into our homes these various beautiful objects that once delighted the eyes of monarchs, that furnished an imperial background for the young Grand Dukes and Duchesses of far away mysterious Russia."<sup>56</sup> As for the icons, they were to provide decorative notes in the domestic interior, helping "to consecrate a quiet corner for a few minute's rest in the season's busy rush." The tactical similarities between Hammer's purple prose and the marketing plan laid out in Lilovaia's memo of 1929 are striking.

In the slick sales patter of Hammer's Depression-era marketing, these icons joined the assortment of imperial possessions that could be used in the American home, "either for décor, to embellish the cabinets of your own collections, or for actual use in the routine of everyday living."<sup>57</sup> Their appraised value had little to do with their intrinsic properties as paintings, still less with their devotional function, and everything to do with the associations the viewer brought with him or her. The gleam of silver and enamel *oklads*, often arranged in symmetrical clusters on the wall, created an aesthetic that is still commonly associated with Russian icons in the United States.

The Hammers did, however, keep an inventory of older icons, some of which are shown alongside "the famous Youssoupoff Family Icon Cabinet" in a 1936 advertisement in *Connoisseur* (Fig. 5). They too came with impe-

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54. Yoori A. Olsufiev, "The Development of Russian Icon Painting from the 12th to the 19th Century," *Art Bulletin*, 12 (Dec. 1930), 373.

55. B. Rosamond Fulmer, "Imperial Russia's Icons," *Park Avenue Social Review* (Jan. 1938), n.p.

56. Hammer Galleries, Inc., *Treasures from the Palaces of Old Russia*, 1935, n.p.

57. *Treasures from the Palaces of Old Russia*, 1935, n.p.

rial provenances ("formerly in the possession of Alexandra Fedorovna"),<sup>58</sup> although it is not clear what evidence of this there was beyond the Hammers' verbal assurance.<sup>59</sup> According to one Hammer biographer, while in Moscow "Victor found gorgeous icons everywhere and snapped them up. Because previous owners had treated them like religious objects rather than precious works of art, the icons had been casually repainted as needed when they passed from father to son. Victor developed a method to strip away the centuries of over-painting so as to reveal the magnificent original underneath," a skill that he claimed to have learned from the composer Maksim Benediktov.<sup>60</sup>

To enhance the value of the older icons in their stock the Hammers enlisted the services of Pavel Muratov, who was in New York on a lecture tour during the spring of 1934.<sup>61</sup> Before 1917 Muratov had been one of the leaders in the aesthetic reappraisal of icons, writing the chapters on icon painting in the sixth volume of Igor' Grabar's *History of Russian Art* and a monograph on the Ostroukhov collection (both 1914).<sup>62</sup> In emigration Muratov's books and articles made him the foremost authority on icons for a Western audience.<sup>63</sup> In their 1935 sales brochure the Hammers were able to report that Muratov had "pronounced some of the Icons secured by Dr. Hammer to be among the rarest examples in existence and the collection, he says, is the finest outside of Russia."<sup>64</sup> An icon of Christ Pantocrator, now at

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58. "The last Czarina Alexandra is said to have assembled the largest private collection in the world and practically all those to be seen in the Hammer Galleries are from her apartments in either the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg or the Alexander Palace in Tsarskoye Selo." (*Treasures from the Palaces of Old Russia*, 1935, n.p.)

59. A seventeenth-century icon of the Dormition acquired from Hammer by Lillian Pratt with an imperial provenance also had a Mosgostorg label, suggesting that it had not in fact come directly from the liquidated palace collections. See object file 45.20.8 at the Virginia Museum of Art, Richmond.

60. Weinberg, *Armand Hammer: The Untold Story*, p. 76. The composer Maksim Benediktovich Benediktov was shot in 1937.

61. Pavel Muratov, *Nochnye mysli. Esse, ocherki, stat'i, 1923-1934* (Moscow: Progress, 2000), pp. 38-39.

62. Pavel Muratov, "Russkaia zhivopis' do serediny XVII veka," in *Istoriia russkogo iskusstva*, ed. by Igor' Grabar', 6 (Moscow: Knebel, 1914); Pavel P. Muratov. *Drevne-russkaia ikonopis' v sobranii I. S. Ostroukhova* (Moscow: K. F. Nekrasov, 1909).

63. See Paul Mouratow, *La peinture ancienne russe* (Rome: A. Stock, 1925) and *Trente-cinq primitifs russes* (Paris: A La Vieille Russie, 1931), for his catalogue of the Jacques Zolotnitzky collection in Paris. Muratov was one of the members of the Kremlin Commission (1918), but according to Gerol'd Vzdornov had little interest in "what seemed to them the practical orientation of the work and very soon bowed out of the group." (G. I. Vzdornov, "Komissiiia po sokhraneniui i raskrytiui pamiatnikov drevnei zhivopisi v Rossii 1918-1924," *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, 80, no. 2 [1981], 308).

64. *Treasures from the Palaces of Old Russia*, n. p.

Bob Jones University Museum, was "considered by Monsieur Muratoff to be by the great Andrei Rublev, or a close follower."<sup>65</sup> (Fig. 6) He also reportedly assigned four festival icons ("acquired by a traveler returning from Russia a decade ago") to Feofan Grek. These icons got star billing at the 1935 Belgrade Square exhibition in London and again at the Hammers' own icon exhibition in 1937.<sup>66</sup>

In availing themselves of Muratov's expertise, the Hammers were applying a strategy made famous in the United States by Lord Duveen's collaboration with Bernard Berenson, the noted connoisseur of Renaissance painting.<sup>67</sup> The ability to discern a particular master's hand was the very essence of connoisseurship and, despite Russian icon painting's deeply canonical traditions of anonymous authorship, collectors and scholars both before and after the 1917 revolution always hoped to find at least one icon by the elusive fifteenth-century monk Andrei Rublev. Failing that, icons still had to be dated and given an approximate geographical identity, and it is here that the potential pitfalls facing Western icon collectors were revealed. Wildly optimistic dates, as much as three or four centuries too early, were assigned to icons on the basis of stylistic resemblance and iconographic parallels, unsupported by the kind of scientific analysis that Soviet restorers had developed a decade before. Though he had been a member of the original Commission for the Preservation and Restoration of Early Painting, Muratov had severed his direct ties with his former colleagues when he emigrated in 1918. The comparative inferiority of Western icon collections – and Western experience in restoring them – gave Muratov little scope to expand on his knowledge, which remained essentially what it had been in 1918.

#### IV

From the beginning of their activities marketing icons, the Antikvariat leadership had anticipated assembling quality collections for clients eager to invest in medieval Russian painting.<sup>68</sup> This tactic had no success in the

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65. *Ibid.*

66. *Seven Centuries of Russian Icon Painting. August 2nd to 31st, 1937.* Exhibition catalogue, Hammer Galleries, Inc., New York. No. 50 illustrated on p. 2.

67. "In 1912 the dealer and the expert signed an agreement according to which Berenson would attribute all the Italian paintings the firm acquired for a share of twenty-five percent on their sale." Flaminia Gennari Santori, *The Melancholy of Masterpieces: Old Master Paintings in America 1900-1914* (Milan: 5 Continents, 2003), p. 17.

68. When the loan exhibition was in Cologne in March 1929, the head of Antikvariat sent a telegram to Grabar' instructing him: "Find out also what the chances are of selling things of first-class quality that are not in the exhibition. We can also make up collections." (ORGTG, f. 106, op. 1, 3872, l. 1.)

United States until 1935, when George R. Hann, founder of the Pittsburgh Aviation Corporation, acquired about one hundred icons and installed them at Treetops, his Sewickley Valley estate in Pennsylvania.

By 1935 the anti-religious campaign that accompanied the First Five-Year Plan of 1928-1932 had temporarily subsided, leaving still more displaced icons in its wake. Among the churches demolished at this time were Moscow's Chudov Monastery and its four churches, the Iverskaia Shrine and Kazan' Cathedral on Red Square (all in 1929), the Simonov Monastery (1930), and the Church of Christ the Savior (1931). Similar campaigns of organized destruction were carried out throughout the Soviet Union, including Ukraine and the Russian North.

These years of cultural revolution also witnessed a major restructuring of the Soviet museum system. In 1929 the Tret'iakov Gallery was elevated from municipal to state importance. Between 1924 and 1929 Narkompros had restricted the gallery's profile to the display of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century painting, while the State Historical Museum was designated Moscow's center for collecting icons and religious art.<sup>69</sup> The goal of the Historical Museum's Department of Religious Life, organized by Alexander Anisimov in 1926, had been to convey "a general picture of early Russian life in its historical development." Within this context icons were still understood as witnesses to history, "not as inanimate toys, but as a living object that condensed within itself the emotional experiences of many generations."<sup>70</sup> But in 1929 the department was closed down and its choicest icons (those with the greatest aesthetic value) transferred to the Tret'iakov the following year.<sup>71</sup>

The Tret'iakov's Department of Early Russian Painting was formed in 1929, when the Ostroukhov collection was formally merged with Pavel Tret'iakov's original small collection of icons and supplemented by icons culled from the Gosmuzeifond. During the next few years the Tret'iakov's holdings increased exponentially, with icons from the State Central Restoration Workshops, from the collection of Aleksandr Anisimov, and from the most recently demolished and closed churches. More first-class icons were transferred to the Tret'iakov from Antikvariat's storerooms, in exchange for which icons of lesser quality were handed over to Antikvariat for sale.<sup>72</sup> A sampling of these can be seen in a photograph that has been variously described as the Antikvariat showroom in the Novomikhailovskii Palace in Leningrad and

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69. *Gosudarstvennaia Tret'iakovskaia Galereia. Katalog sobraniia* (Moscow: Krasnaia Ploshchad', 1995), 1: 12.

70. P. I. Karpov, *Bytovoe emotsional'noe tvorchestvo v drevne-russkom ikusstve* (Moscow: Knigosoiuz, 1928), p. 53.

71. Antonova and Mneva, *Katalog drevnerusskoi zhivopisi*, p. 33.

72. For example, #527 in 1931; #25 and #238 in 1933; #272 in 1938 (Antonova and Mneva, *Katalog drevnerusskoi zhivopisi*).

Gostorg's antique shop in Moscow (Fig. 7).<sup>73</sup> Among them were some of the icons offered to George Hann in 1935.

Hann selected his collection from hand-colored photos sent from Moscow through an intermediary.<sup>74</sup> He had never visited the Soviet Union and the source of his interest in icons remains a mystery, but Andrei Avinov, director of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History and cataloguer of Hann's collection, suggested that he was conscious of saving religious art for posterity.<sup>75</sup> Avinov wrote in *The Carnegie Magazine* in 1944: "It is a comforting thought that these precious objects of Holy Russia are now safe and secure, preserved in the deserving hands of their present owner. Mr. Hann is to be congratulated upon conceiving a beautiful idea and bringing his endeavor into realization with a rare singleness of purpose."<sup>76</sup>

Until the collection was dispersed at auction in 1980 it was considered one of the largest and most important of Russian icons in private hands outside Russia. It included monumental church icons from the late fifteenth, sixteenth, and early seventeenth centuries, the earliest – a pair of deesis panels of Archangels Michael and Gabriel – being dated to the fourteenth century. Most had undergone varying degrees of restoration to prepare them for the export market. A large icon of the Last Judgment had been restored by Grigorii Chirikov, the leading restorer of the State Central Restoration Workshops. Icons of the Ascension and Dormition had at some point in their history undergone major repair to return them to a rectangular format after being cut to a circular frame.<sup>77</sup> Significantly, none of the icons was covered with a "complete *oklad*," and only a few seventeenth-century icons were adorned with *basma* (decorative metal frames). The contrast with the late imperial icons that had been offered to American buyers over the previous five years

73. Il'in and Semenova, *Prodannye sokrovishcha*, pp. 64-65; G. I. Vzdornov, *Restavratsiia i nauka. Ocherki po istorii otkrytiia i izucheniia drevnerusskoi zhivopisi* (Moscow: Indrik, 2006), p. 319.

74. According to Michael Glenny, the intermediary was "a certain Mr. Hamilton." In 1935 he showed Hann a set of hand-tinted black-and-white photographs of icons. The following year "Hamilton returned to Moscow and bought these from Mosgostorg." (Michael Glenny, "Icons, Fakers, and Fools," *Art and Antiques* [April 1984], p. 53.) The source of Glenny's information was presumably Vladimir Teteriatnikov, who in 1980 claimed that most of the Hann icons were fakes.

75. *Russian Icons and Objects of Ecclesiastical and Decorative Arts from the Collection of George R. Hann*. Exhibition catalogue (New York: Carnegie Institute, Department of Fine Arts, Jan. 12-Febr. 22, 1944).

76. Andrey Avinoff, "A Loan Exhibition of Russian Icons," *Bulletin of Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2, no. 8 (April 1944), 227-32.

77. See Christine Havice, "Dormition Icon," in *Four Icons in the Menil Collection* (Houston, TX: Menil Foundation, 1992), pp. 24-43.

was self-evident. Only at the traveling exhibition of 1930-1932 had Americans seen icons of this age and quality.

What the collection did share with the Hammer and Schaffer "collections of Czarist treasures" was a strong emphasis on provenance. Although more than half of the icons came to the United States with their histories entirely erased (for instance, an icon of the Holy Sophia which since 1931 had passed through the successive clearing-houses of the Gosmuzeifond, Mosgostorg, and Antikvariat),<sup>78</sup> a substantial number bore inventory numbers from the Tret'iakov Gallery. Of those, four were from the former A. V. Morozov collection, 119 of which had been transferred to the Tret'iakov in 1930 from the State Historical Museum.<sup>79</sup> One of the Hann icons, of St. Macarius of Alexandria and St. Macarius of Egypt, was from Pavel Tret'iakov's original small collection, and could claim to be a genuine national treasure, having been illustrated in one of the most famous publications of Nicholas I's reign, the multi-volume *Antiquities of the Russian State* (1848-1853) (Fig. 8). The authors of the 1963 catalogue of the Tret'iakov Gallery's icon collection confirmed that the icon had been "removed from the collection and transferred to Antikvariat" in 1936, i.e., specifically for Hann.<sup>80</sup> In all, forty-four of Hann's icons were deaccessioned from the Tret'iakov's holdings.

These proofs of pedigree, confirmed by the numbers and labels on the icons' backs, were naturally seen by Hann and Avinov as a strong guarantee of aesthetic value. "The fact that a number of objects . . . formerly belonged to [the Tret'iakov Gallery] constitutes a commendation of their qualifications," Avinov wrote in his 1944 catalogue of the collection. "Many other icons in the collection can be traced as regards the former owners in their pedigree and are highly important in illustrating the development of early Russian ecclesiastical paintings."<sup>81</sup> This mark of quality was particularly important given the embryonic state of icon collecting and scholarship in the United States. While Avinov's erudition on the history of icons was profound (his library comprised 645 volumes on the subject), he had little if any experience in the connoisseurship of icons as complex physical objects. Without the opportunity to observe at first hand the revelations of Soviet conservation, he naturally fell back on the iconographic-archaeological method based on printed sources.

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78. More specific information on provenance was provided only in the 1980 Christie catalogue of the collection (*The George R. Hann Collection. Part One. Russian Icons. Ecclesiastical and Secular Works of Art. Embroidery, Silver, Porcelain and Malachite*. Christie's [New York, April, 17-18, 1980]).

79. *Gosudarstvennaia Tret'iakovskaia Galereia. Katalog sobraniia*, p. 12.

80. Antonova and Mneva, *Katalog drevnerusskoi zhivopisi*, p. 17.

81. Avinoff, "A Loan Exhibition of Russian Icons," p. 227.

A second collection made up for a wealthy American client from Tret'iakov reserves deserves mention for the light it sheds on the way art and antiques oiled the wheels of diplomacy in the 1930s. America's second ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1937-1938, Joseph Davies, availed himself of official willingness to help him build a small collection of icons during his mission to Moscow. Like others in the diplomatic community, Davies and his wife, Marjorie Merriweather Post, frequented the state-run commission shops and between them acquired an eclectic assortment of icons, in addition to porcelain, vestments, chalices, and bits of malachite and silver.<sup>82</sup> But Davies was particularly moved by the renewed assault on the church that accompanied the purges of 1937 and asked for official permission to "purchase some of these sacred relics, . . . If we can do so," he wrote in his diary, "we will save for ultimate sacred purpose some at least of these beautiful things of the religious life of old Russia." Permission was granted and a collection of some twenty icons put together for him, which he described as "all of the highest type of that kind of painting. . . . They were selected by the leading technical experts on icons connected with the Soviet government and particularly with the Tretyakov Museum. They are designed to cover the best types of the various periods."<sup>83</sup> In a later version of events, Davies wrote: "These icons were selected from museum pieces, and had been exhibited in the Kremlin, Tretyakof, and other galleries in the Soviet Union. I was particularly fortunate in being able to purchase them from the government. I think it can be said conservatively that it is probably the most distinctive and valuable single collection of icons outside of Russia."<sup>84</sup>

Davies presented his icons, together with a large collection of contemporary Soviet paintings, to the University of Wisconsin at Madison, his alma mater, in 1938. As with the Hann icons and the Hammer and Schaffer inventories, the collection made up for Davies assumed added value by the inclusion of icons with specific provenances. Two purportedly came from the historic Chudov Monastery, demolished several years before, and seven from the Pecherskaia Lavra in Kiev, which was closed down in 1929. An icon of St. Elijah in the Desert came from the former Riabushinskii collection. There is no reason to suspect that these icons did not, in fact, come from the store-

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82. The Davies returned to the United States with thirty-seven icons, three of which were purchased from A La Vieille Russie in Paris. When the couple divorced in 1955, Mrs. Post retained the older icons, while Davies gave his to the National Cathedral in Washington. These were subsequently sold at Sotheby's New York (*Russian and Greek Icons*, December 15, 1981). On the Hillwood collection, see Wendy Salmond, *Russian Icons at Hillwood* (Washington, DC: Hillwood Museum and Gardens, 1996).

83. Joseph E. Davies, *Mission to Moscow* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1941), p. 30.

84. George Galavaris, *Icons from the Elvehjem Art Center* (Madison: The Elvehjem Art Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1973), p. viii.



rooms where the Tret'iakov's rapidly expanding holdings were kept. But a different kind of information is needed – for instance, comparison with the inventory numbers on other icons in the Tret'iakov's collection and above all a careful analysis of their physical condition – to understand where the Hann and Davies icons (long considered the finest in the United States) – rank in the hierarchy of early Russian painting.

## V

Icons marketed to American customers through the official channels controlled by Antikvariat clearly fall into two seemingly antithetical categories. Hammer and Schaffer stock might be seen in books on Fabergé or the Romanov family, while Hann's icons were reproduced in more scholarly surveys, placed shoulder to shoulder with the finest icons from Soviet museums.<sup>85</sup> As such, they have complicated the understanding and appreciation of icons in the United States ever since.

The “imperial icons” sold in the United States between the wars have long represented everything an icon is supposed not to be, yet they are virtually unique in their clear provenance, historical specificity, and aesthetic coherence.<sup>86</sup> In a post-Soviet era that has seen the Orthodox Church regain its power, the imperial family canonized, and the Cathedral of Christ the Savior rebuilt, the “tasteless junk” once foisted on unsophisticated, sensation-seeking Americans has come into its own. This is born out by the efforts that have been made to recreate the imperial bedroom in the Alexander Palace at Tsarskoe Selo. On one wall is a life-size photograph of the alcove where the imperial couple's beds once stood; to either side is a single bed above which is hung a montage of late icons standing in for, yet unable to replace, those that were lost.

For reasons that are difficult to fathom, the cultivation of a discriminating market for medieval Russian icons in the United States remains elusive. As evidence of this, George Hann's gift of an important icon of Christ In Majesty to The Metropolitan Museum of Art was put in storage, much to the collector's displeasure, and remains there to this day.<sup>87</sup> The scandal surrounding the sale of the Hann collection in 1980, when Vladimir Teteriatnikov dis-

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85. See the illustrations in Cyril G. E. Bunt, *Russian Art from Scythians to Soviets* (London and New York: The Studio, 1946). In Tamara Talbot Rice, *Russian Icons* (London: Spring Books, 1963), thirty-one of the forty-eight icons illustrated were from the Hann collection, supplemented by the rarest early icons in Soviet museums.

86. See Wendy R. Salmond, *Tradition in Transition. Russian Icons in the Age of the Romanovs* (Washington, DC: Hillwood Museum & Gardens, 2004).

87. See No. 29 in *Russian Icons and Objects of Ecclesiastical and Decorative Arts From the Collection of George R. Hann*.

missed the most important pieces as Soviet fakes, has still not dissipated, and the fear of being duped – whether by a conscientious nineteenth-century copy or a clever modern fake – continues to haunt all who collect and appraise Russian icons.<sup>88</sup> The icon files in American museums are a paper trail of uncertainty, confusion, and disagreement between experts over matters of dating and authenticity.

The familiar image of the Russian icon in the United States has remained the sensationalized Hammer version, with its romantic overtones and jeweled surfaces. In 1940 the publication of a detective novel attracted some notice in the Russian émigré press. Set at the 1939 San Francisco World's Fair, John Mersereau's *Murder Loves Company* centered on "a fabulous article called the Ikon of St. John Chrysostom," which was stolen from a Russian émigré, Princess Tania Varnakov. The stolen saint was "evidently some shakes. Done in a mosaic of three primary colors, rubies, sapphires, and canary diamonds, he would have turned over in a bank for a cool hundred thousand, the princess said. But his antique value she placed at five times that, five times at the very least."<sup>89</sup> This lurid description might well have been written by Armand Hammer, or indeed by Antikvariat's Tat'iana Lilovaia. For the hero of Mersereau's story, as for the American public at large, it was the lure of royalty and precious gems that succeeded in challenging the conventional image of an icon as "a dull primitive thing done in dirty blue and white enamel with a frame of tarnished brass." The early medieval icon has yet to have its day.

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<sup>88</sup> See Vladimir Teteriatnikov, *Icons and Fakes*, 3 vols. (New York: Teteriatnikov Art Expertise, 1981).

<sup>89</sup> John Mersereau, *Murder Loves Company* (Boulder, CO: Rue Morgue Press, 2004), p. 52.



**Fig. 1: "Religion and Business."** Caption: "First of all, we protest against the looting of churches, and second, how much do you want for these things?" From *Vozrozhdenie*, no. 1749, March 17, 1930.



**Fig. 2:** "The Empress's Bedroom," still from Sergei Eisenstein's film *October* (1927).



**Fig. 3:** Icon of Christ Not Made by hands, 1773. Betrothal gift from Catherine II to Tsarevich Paul. From Pavlovsk Palace. Purchased by Mrs. F. W. Roebbling from the "Crown Jewel Collections in the Hammer Collection of Russian Imperial Art Treasures" sale at Lord & Taylor, New York, 1934. From *Catalogue of the Pictorial Art Loaned for the Exhibition "Five Hundred Years of Russian Art." Benefit Russian War Relief. The Gould House Galleries of Gimbel Brothers.* New York, 1943.



**Fig. 4:** Icon of the Vladimir Mother of God with Selected Saints. Moscow. Khlebnikov, maker. The icon hung in the bedroom of the tsarevich in the Alexander palace, Tsarskoe Selo. An inscribed plaque on the lower edge reads: "To His Imperial Highness Tsarevich and Grand Duke Aleksei Nikolaevich from the Nobility of Nizhnii Novgorod." From *The Schaffer Collection of Authentic Imperial Russian Art Treasures* (New York, n.d.). Courtesy of A La Vieille Russie, New York.



**Fig. 5:** "Icons from the personal quarters of the late Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna, of Russia." Advertisement for Hammer Galleries, Inc., New York. From *The Connoisseur* (December 1936).



**Fig. 6:** Icon of Christ the Savior, that Pavel Muratov reputedly attributed to Andrei Rublev, fifteenth century. Shown at “Seven Centuries of Russian Icons” exhibition, Hammer Galleries, New York in 1937. Courtesy of Bob Jones University Museum and Gallery, Greenville, South Carolina.





**Fig. 7:** Icons for sale. The location has been variously identified as the antique shop run by Mosgostorg and Antikvariat's premises at the Novomikhailovskii Palace in Leningrad 1932-1936.



**Fig. 8:** Icon of St. Macarius of Alexandria and St. Macarius of Egypt, formerly in the collection of Pavel Tret'iakov. Purchased by George H. Hahn, 1936. From *Russian Icons and Objects of Ecclesiastical and Decorative Arts from the Collection of George H. Hahn* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Institute Press, 1944).